

# The Fjord Name *Gullmarn*: The Place and its Environment<sup>1</sup>

Birgit Falck-Kjällquist  
*Sweden*

## Abstract

The fjord Gullmarn, *goðmarr* 1300-1325, *til Goðmars* around 1300, stretches from Skagerrak into central Bohuslän. Gullmarn's fauna is very special as an interchange with fresh, more saline and colder water from outer Skagerrak occurs at least once or twice a year.

Numerous archaeological finds from the Stone Age onwards indicate the early presence of people in the area and continuous habitation throughout the Middle and Late Iron Age. A figural goldfoil found close to the inner eastern shore may indicate an old secular and/or religious centre. An indication of a secular centre in the inner part of the fjord may come from the fact that around 1300 King Sverrir summoned a thing at Fyrileif in the inner part of Gullmarn, where several finds from the Bronze Age have been discovered.

The specific of *Gullmarn* contains ON *goð* n. 'god, gods (superior powers)' and the generic ON *marr* m. 'sea, fjord', the name surely meaning 'the fjord related to or belonging to the gods'. At the time of the name-giving the fjord was most likely seen as closely connected to the gods, a sacred place forming an interface between the human world and the world of the gods; cf. water in old Celtic religion.

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## The Place and its Environment

Gullmarn is a deep and narrow firth that cuts deep into central Bohuslän from Skagerrak. Today the fjord is about 25 km long, relatively narrow (1-3 km broad) with a depth of about 125 metres. The inner wider part of the fjord branches off into Färlevfjorden, also named Färlevkilen, Saltkällefjorden and Gullmarsvik, as can be seen on map 1 (Fig. 1). Some of the shores are high and steep, especially the eastern and south-eastern shores. Gullmarn is a true threshold fjord, that is, a fjord with a fairly shallow plateau like a threshold under the water surface at its mouth. The threshold of Gullmarn is an extended plateau about 45 metres under the surface. An interchange with fresh, more saline and colder water from outer Skagerrak occurs at least once or twice a year, mostly in winter, when strong internal movements of the water over the threshold take place. This seems to be the genesis of the unique fauna of Gullmarn as it creates a high oceanic salinity of the water in the fjord and also a low temperature in the deeper parts. This creates possibilities for developing individual fauna with species that are mostly only found in Arctic waters.

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<sup>1</sup> This study is part of an investigation to be published by the Institute for Language and Folklore Department of Dialectology, Onomastic and Folklore Research, Gothenburg. My grateful thanks to The Royal Society of Arts and Sciences in Gothenburg for contributions making it possible to participate in the International Congress of Onomastic Sciences in Glasgow and to present this article there.

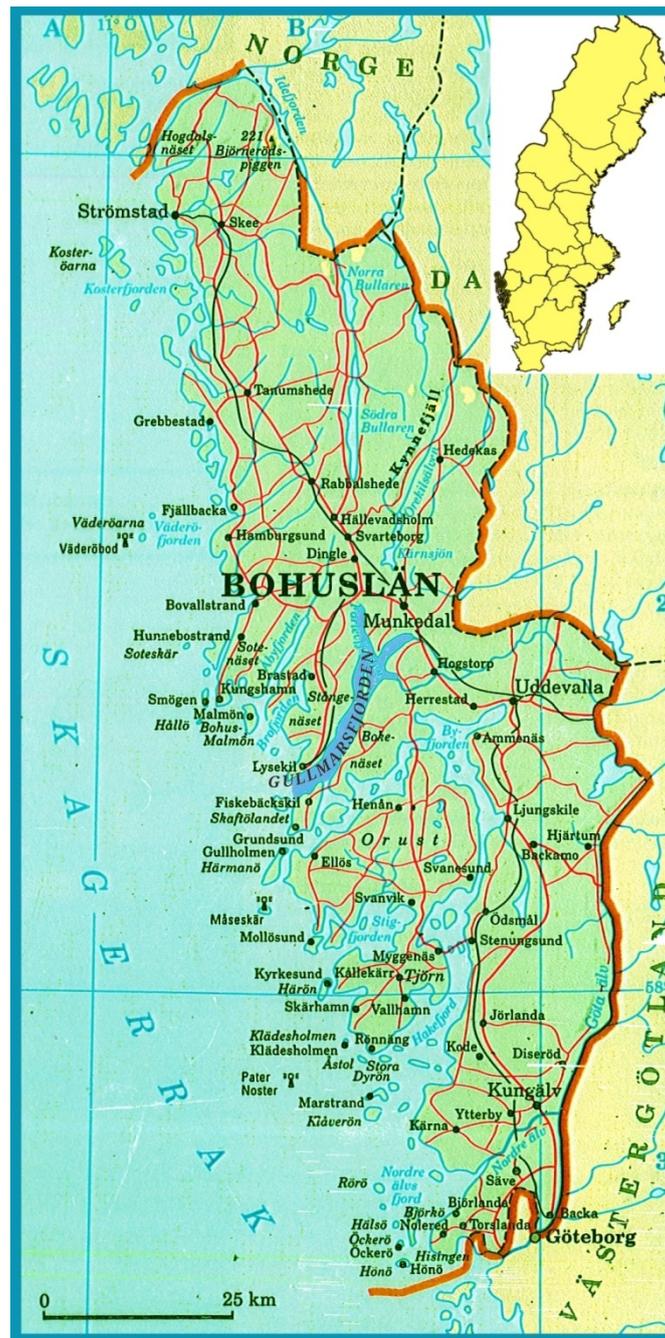


Fig. 1. Map showing Gullmarn in the central part of Bohuslän, based on a map in NE 3: 118 (Image editing by Bengt Edqvist)

In more ancient times and as late as during the Bronze Age, the inner part of Gullmarn, that is, Färlevfjorden, was connected with Åbyfjorden by a system of connecting sounds. Fig. 2 shows the extent of the fjord and its shoreline some 4000 years ago, around 2000 BC. The extent of the fjord today is shown in light blue. The elevation of the land in the area is, as in Bohuslän in general, difficult to estimate, but about 1000 years ago (around AD 1000) the shoreline might have been about 4.5 metres above today's shoreline. The elevation of the land is usually estimated to be 4 mm a year in the northern part of Bohuslän. Numerous archaeological finds from the Stone Age onwards indicate early presence of people in the area and continuous habitation throughout the Middle and Late Iron Age. For example a

number of graves dating from the Bronze Age are located not far from Färlevfjorden (Färlevkilen) in the inner part of Gullmarn, and several dolmens from the Neolithic are situated not far from Gullmarn, by a habitation named *Flat* (the Finsbo area, Lyse Parish). Here a workshop for the production of flint tools has also been found, indicating settlement from the Mesolithic. Several archaeological excavations in an area close to the northern shore of Gullmarn, 50-65 metres above today's shoreline indicate settlement in the area from around 9000 BC (see e.g. Schmitt *et al.* 2006: 1-28; 2009: 1-27).

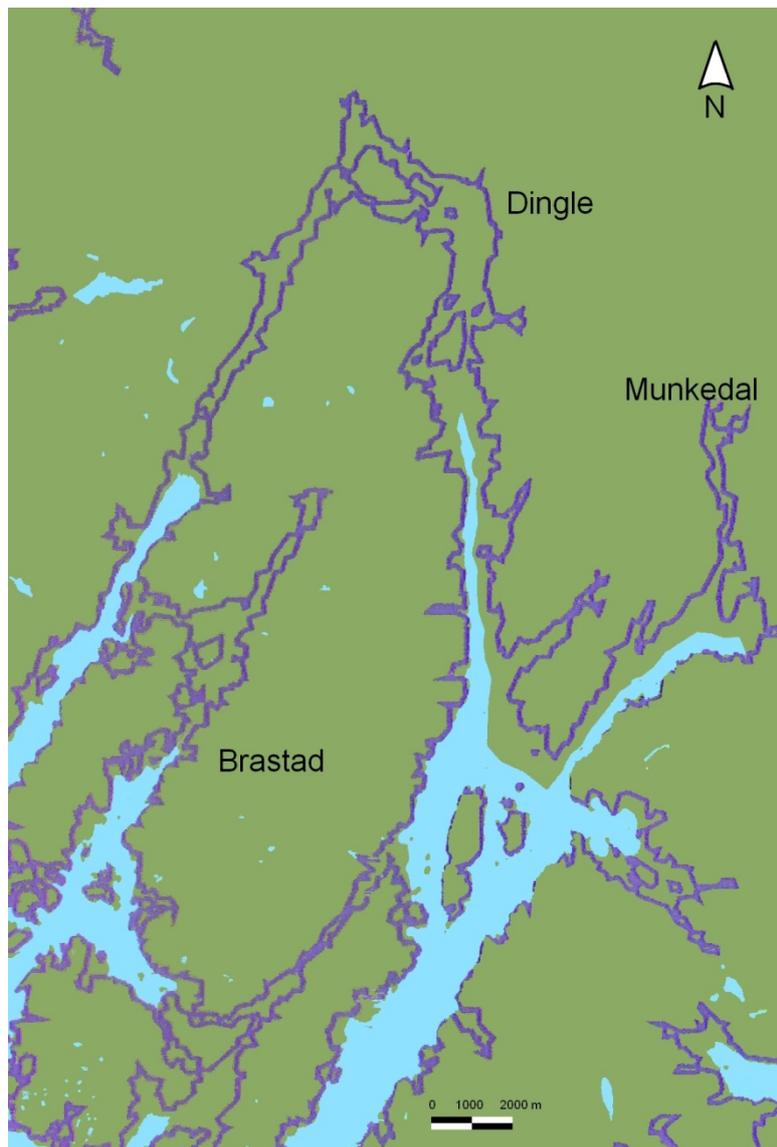


Fig. 2. Map showing the extent of the fjord and its shoreline about 4,000 years ago (about 2000 years BC). Note that the extension of the fjord today is shown by a light blue colour. Map produced by Robert Härnek based on a map from the Geological Survey of Sweden (permission I 2009/0714).

A figural gold foil was found in 1912 in the inner part of Gullmarn by the mouth of Gullmarsvik, the eastern one of the previously mentioned inner creeks of Gullmarn, not far from the habitation Gullmarsvik. The foil was found during work on the foundation of a house under construction, material (gravel) for which surely came from a gravel pit in the

neighbourhood. The exact position of the gravel pit, however, has not yet been found. The gold foil may indicate an old regional secular or religious centre.<sup>2</sup> Close to the fjord, not far from the place where the gold foil was found, the estate of *Börsås* is situated by the *Börsås* ridge, whose name probably contains the genitive of ON *byrgi* n. (Palm 1978: 163-164) Traces of an ancient castle or ancient entrenchments from the 5th or 6th centuries have been found at the highest point of the ridge. Moreover, stationary ancient remains from the Iron Age are abundant in the whole fjord area.

An indication of a secular centre in the inner part of the fjord may come from the fact that about 1300 King Sverrir summoned a thing at Fyrileif (today's Färlev) in the inner part of Gullmarn (according to Sverri's saga from about 1300), where several finds from the Bronze Age have been discovered. The reign of King Sverrir is supposed to have lasted from 1184 to 1202.

## The Name *Gullmarn*

Gullmarn is one of the geographical entities in Bohuslän mentioned in ON literature, *goðmarr* 1300-1325 (AM 748 I a 4<sup>o</sup>) and *til Goðmars* in Sverri's saga around 1300 (AM 327 4<sup>o</sup>). The name is written *Guldmaren* 1556 (NRR 1: 205), *Gulmarn*, *-maren*, *Guldmaren* (JN: 1574-1597: 36, 139, 218, 497, 532). The writing *Guldmaren* of 1556 may be due to a misunderstanding, as are other name forms in this source. It nevertheless represents the oldest name form hitherto found with *guld-* ('gold-') in the specific.

The name mostly used today is *Gullmarn*, which is also the name form used by the National Land Survey of Sweden, for example, on Swedish national maps. As mentioned above the oldest known form of the name *Gullmarn* is *goðmarr*. Rygh (1896: 30, 34, 67) presents the linguistic interpretation from which all later interpretations originate: the specific of the name contains ON *goð* n. and the generic *marr* m., which at least in the names *Goðmarr* and *Grenmarr* is supposed to mean 'fjord' or 'bay'. Lindroth (1931: 85 f.), also aims to explain why the name-givers long ago found the name *Goðmarr* appropriate for the fjord. He suggests that the name designates that the water was considered by the name-givers, for unknown reasons, to be in some respect holy and an object of worship.

The name is seen here as an onomastic compound formation, consisting of two elements: specific and generic. There is scarcely any reason to suppose that the name contains an ON appellative *\*goðmarr* 'fjord where the gods reside and where they are worshipped'. That the name contains such an appellative cannot, however, be completely ruled out, even if there is hitherto no documentation that such an ON appellative was ever in use. It may, however, be observed that an interesting parallel can be found in the names *Gudhem*, *Gudhjem*. As shown by Kousgård Sørensen (1985: 131 f.) and Jørgensen (2011: 177 f.), there is every reason to believe that those names contain the ON appellative *goðheimr* 'place where the gods reside and where they are worshipped'. This explanation for the name *Gudhem* is also presented in the Swedish dictionary of place names (SOL: 97). As no ON appellative *\*goðmarr* has been found, the specific of the name is however here seen as containing ON *goð* n. 'god, gods'. Later *ð* in *goð* developed into *l* or *ll* before the consonant

<sup>2</sup> See further Lamm (2004: 56 f.) with literature.

*m*, which is not uncommon in Swedish dialects. Compare also dialectal *gullmor* for Swedish Standard *gudmor* ‘godmother’. This could have created a name form *golmarr* or *gollmar*, the specific of which has the same form as ON *goll*, *gull*, dialectal *gull* ‘gold’. Since the *u*-vowel in the dialectal forms of *Gullmarn* and the appellative *gull* (Swedish Standard *guld* ‘gold’) in Bohuslän are pronounced in the same way, it is quite likely that some name users thought they heard the dialectal form for Sw. *guld* (Eng. *gold*) and spelled accordingly. This explains written forms like *Guldmarn* etc. The connection to gold may come from a commendatory use of the name, either based on positive impressions of the fjord in the minds of the name users (e.g. an ample supply of fish) or on a wish to flatter and thereby appease supernatural forces close to the fjord.

As stated above the generic contains *marr* m. in the names *Goðmarr* and *Grenmarr* surely with the meaning ‘fjord’ or ‘bay’. An example of *marr* in names of inlets and fjords is ON *Grenmarr*, see e.g. Andersson (1998: 589) and Rygh (1896: 67), who states that fjord names containing *marr* may have been more common before than they are nowadays. *Marr* may then have been part of long since forgotten names of fjords that are today known under other names. At least one more fjord name containing *marr* may be mentioned here, namely *Marren*, designating a Norwegian fjord or bay in Eigersund, Rogaland, according to the Norwegian place name dictionary (NSL: 306).

## The Sacred Space – Gullmarn as a Cosmologic Boundary Area

The meaning of the name *Gullmarn* thus probably is ‘fjord that in one way or another is close to the gods’, alluding that the name bearer in some way is supposed to have a close connection to the gods (superior powers). It is possible that the fjord, from the oldest times up to the introduction of Christianity, was seen by people moving in this area as representing a place where the presence of the gods was strongly felt or that it was water belonging to the gods. It seems to be not uncommon in many cultures that a sharp distinction is made between different cosmic regions or worlds, for example, between the world of human beings and the worlds of the gods, the spirits or the forefathers (ancestors) etc. and that there is a focus on certain places where it is possible that the world of humans and the world of myths meet. From such a perspective a holy place may be described as an interface where the world of the human beings comes into contact with other worlds, a scene where mythological worlds manifest themselves in the world of the humans, a gateway through which it is in some way possible to get into contact with these other worlds and their inhabitants, as Vikstrand puts it (2001: 26 f.) with reference to Brereton (1987: 528 f.). This seems to be a well-known quality or nature of a holy place. Furthermore, according to Green (1995: 90), it seems that in early Celtic religion, in which the religious powers often seem to have their home under the earth or in the underground, water functions as a surface of communication between terrestrial and non-terrestrial worlds. Such places were looked upon as dangerous and unsafe, but because they were gateways between different worlds, it was considered easier to get into contact with the world of spirits at such places. So, a holy place, in this case *Gullmarn*, should then indeed be seen as a cosmologic interface or gateway to the gods.

As a parallel one can see a name which occurs at several places in Sweden, *Odensjö(n)* (Kousgård Sørensen 1984: 172-174; 1996: 155, 378), perhaps also the Danish river names *Guden* ‘the place or river consecrated to the gods?’ (Kousgård Sørensen 1973: 286-289; 1996: 378). Compare, however, Elmevik (2006: 45 f.), who stresses the possibility of the name containing another word than *god*. Furthermore, the Swedish name *Gussjön*, designating some lakes in northern Sweden, has been considered to contain *gudh* ‘god’ in the specific on what seems to be somewhat unsure grounds, as it has also been considered likely that *Gussjön* contains another word in the specific.<sup>3</sup>

It is possible that the abundance of fish, together with the exceptional fauna of Gullmarn, which includes several kinds of fish, even visits of deep-sea fish such as basking shark, has promoted the idea of gods being close and of the fjord being a gateway to the world of gods. Especially basking shark is a big fish (about 10-15 metres long) and an imposing sight when it moves – usually in a group – close to the water surface. In the deepest part of the fjord a special species of big crab with a very unusual appearance can also be found. This crab is called *trollkrabba* in Swedish, which in direct translation might be *magic crab* or *witch crab*. One cannot rule out that sightings of those big, unusual, perhaps even terrifying animals helped to give people in the area the impression of the fjord as a place of a very special kind where the presence of a rather frightening world, far above ordinary human beings might be close.

When the area was Christianized and the old gods gradually lost their importance and were seen as more or less frightening relics of the past, the fjord might have been seen as a haunt of dreaded supernatural or magical beings. Folktales with supernatural or terrifying content connected with parts of the fjord, in particular with its inner part, suggest this. The most common stories are about dragons or sea monsters which live in the fjord and frighten people who live in the area or pass by. The monsters are said to catch their prey – animals as well as people – through various kind of trickery and threats and then devour them.<sup>4</sup>

## Summing up

The specific of the name *Gullmarn* contains ON *goð* n. ‘god, gods, (superior powers)’ and the generic ON *marr* m. ‘fjord, bay’, the name surely meaning ‘the fjord related to or belonging to the gods’. At the time of the name-giving the fjord was most likely seen as closely connected to the gods, a sacred space forming an interface between the human world and the world of the gods.

Birgit Falck-Kjällquist  
Sweden  
bifak@tele2.se

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<sup>3</sup> See Nyman (2014) with literature.

<sup>4</sup> See e.g. VFF 1096, 1253, 1759, 1771, 1995.

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- AM 327 4to = from c. 1300, nr 327 4<sup>o</sup> i AM; dated after ONP Registre: 452.
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